

THE
KING'S THRESHOLD

BY
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PERSONS IN THE PLAY

KING GUAIRE.

SEANCHAN (*pronounced* SHANAHAN).

HIS PUPILS.

THE MAYOR OF KINVARA.

TWO CRIPPLES.

BRIAN, *an old servant*.

THE LORD HIGH CHAMBERLAIN.

A SOLDIER.

A MONK.

COURT LADIES.

TWO PRINCESSES.

FEDELM.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD

SCENE : *Steps before the Palace of KING
GUAIRE at Gort. A table or litter in front
of steps at one side, with food on it, and a
bench. SEANCHAN lying on steps. PUPILS
before steps. KING on the upper step before
a curtained door.*

KING. I welcome you that have the mastery
Of the two kinds of Music : the one kind
Being like a woman, the other like a man.
Both you that understand stringed instru-
ments,
And how to mingle words and notes together
So artfully, that all the Art's but Speech
Delighted with its own music ; and you that
carry
The long twisted horn, and understand
The heady notes that, being without words,
Can hurry beyond Time and Fate and
Change.
For the high angels that drive the horse of
Time—
The golden one by day, by night the silver—

68 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Are not more welcome to one that loves the
world

For some fair woman's sake.

I have called you hither
To save the life of your great master,
Seanchan,

For all day long it has flamed up or flickered
To the fast cooling hearth.

OLDEST PUPIL. When did he sicken ?
Is it a fever that is wasting him ?

KING. No fever or sickness. He has
chosen death :

Refusing to eat or drink, that he may bring
Disgrace upon me ; for there is a custom,
An old and foolish custom, that if a man
Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and
starve

Upon another's threshold till he die,
The common people, for all time to come,
Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,
Even though it be the King's.

OLDEST PUPIL. My head whirls round ;
I do not know what I am to think or say.
I owe you all obedience, and yet
How can I give it, when the man I have loved
More than all others, thinks that he is wronged
So bitterly, that he will starve and die
Rather than bear it ? Is there any man
Will throw his life away for a light issue ?

KING. It is but fitting that you take his side
Until you understand how light an issue

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 69

Has put us by the ears. Three days ago
I yielded to the outcry of my courtiers—
Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law—
Who long had thought it against their dignity
For a mere man of words to sit amongst them
At the great council of the state and share
In their authority. I bade him go,
Though at the first with kind and courteous
words,

But when he pleaded for the poets' right,
Established at the establishment of the world,
I said that I was King, and that all rights
Had their original fountain in some king,
And that it was the men who ruled the world,
And not the men who sang to it, who should
sit

Where there was the most honour. My
courtiers—

Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law—
Shouted approval ; and amid that noise
Seanchan went out, and from that hour to this
Although there is good food and drink
beside him,
Has eaten nothing.

OLDEST PUPIL. I can breathe again.
You have taken a great burden from my mind
For that old custom's not worth dying for.

KING. Persuade him to eat or drink. Till
yesterday
I thought that hunger and weakness had been
enough ;

70 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

But finding them too trifling and too light
To hold his mouth from biting at the grave,
I called you hither, and all my hope's in you,
And certain of his neighbours and good
friends

That I have sent for. While he is lying there
Perishing, my good name in the world
Is perishing also. I cannot give way,
Because I am King ; because if I gave way,
My Nobles would call me a weakling, and it
may be

The very throne be shaken.

OLDEST PUPIL. I will persuade him.
Your words had been enough persuasion,
King ;

But being lost in sleep or reverie,
He cannot hear them.

KING. Make him eat or drink.
Nor is it all because of my good name
I'd have him do it, for he is a man
That might well hit the fancy of a king,
Banished out of his country, or a woman's
Or any other's that can judge a man
For what he is. But I that sit a throne,
And take my measure from the needs of the
State,
Call his wild thought that overruns the
measure,
Making words more than deeds, and his
proud will
That would unsettle all, most mischievous,

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 71

And he himself a most mischievous man.

[He turns to go, and then returns again.]

Promise a house with grass and tillage land,
An annual payment, jewels and silken ware,
Or anything but that old right of the poets.

[He goes into palace.]

OLDEST PUPIL. The King did wrong to
abrogate our right ;

But Seanchan, who talks of dying for it,
Talks foolishly. Look at us, Seanchan ;
Waken out of your dream and look at us,
Who have ridden under the moon and all the
day,

Until the moon has all but come again,
That we might be beside you.

SEANCHAN *[half turning round, leaning on
his elbow, and speaking as if in a dream].*

I was but now

In Almhuin, in a great high-raftered house,
With Finn and Osgar. Odours of roast flesh
Rose round me, and I saw the roasting spits ;
And then the dream was broken, and I saw
Grania dividing salmon by a stream.

OLDEST PUPIL. Hunger has made you
dream of roasting flesh ;

And though I all but weep to think of it,
The hunger of the crane, that starves himself
At the full moon because he is afraid
Of his own shadow and the glittering water,
Seems to me little more fantastical
Than this of yours.

72 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

SEANCHAN. Why, that's the very truth.
It is as though the moon changed every-
thing—

Myself and all that I can hear and see ;
For when the heavy body has grown weak,
There's nothing that can tether the wild mind
That, being moonstruck and fantastical,
Goes where it fancies. I have even thought
I knew your voice and face, but now the
words

Are so unlikely that I needs must ask
Who is it that bids me put my hunger by.

OLDEST PUPIL. I am your oldest pupil,
Seanchan ;
The one that has been with you many years—
So many, that you said at Candlemas
That I had almost done with school, and
knew

All but all that poets understand.

SEANCHAN. My oldest pupil ? No, that
cannot be,
For it is some one of the courtly crowds
That have been round about me from sunrise,
And I am tricked by dreams ; but I'll refute
them.

At Candlemas I bid that pupil tell me
Why poetry is honoured, wishing to know
If he had any weighty argument
For distant countries and strange, churlish
kings.

What did he answer ?

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 73

OLDEST PUPIL. I said the poets hung
Images of the life that was in Eden
About the child-bed of the world, that it,
Looking upon those images, might bear
Triumphant children. But why must I
stand here,
Repeating an old lesson, while you starve ?

SEANCHAN. Tell on, for I begin to know
the voice.

What evil thing will come upon the world
If the Arts perish ?

OLDEST PUPIL. If the Arts should perish,
The world that lacked them would be like a
woman,

That looking on the cloven lips of a hare,
Brings forth a hare-lipped child.

SEANCHAN. But that's not all :
For when I asked you how a man should guard
Those images, you had an answer also,
If you're the man that you have claimed to be,
Comparing them to venerable things
God gave to men before he gave them wheat.

OLDEST PUPIL. I answered—and the word
was half your own—

That he should guard them as the Men of
Dea

Guard their four treasures, as the Grail King
guards

His holy cup, or the pale, righteous horse
The jewel that is underneath his horn,
Pouring out life for it as one pours out

74 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Sweet heady wine. . . . But now I understand ;

You would refute me out of my own mouth ;
And yet a place at council, near the King,
Is nothing of great moment, Seanchan.

How does so light a thing touch poetry ?

[SEANCHAN *is now sitting up. He still looks dreamily in front of him.*]

SEANCHAN. At Candlemas you called this poetry

One of the fragile, mighty things of God,
That die at an insult.

OLDEST PUPIL [*to other PUPILS*]. Give me some true answer,

Upon that day he spoke about the Court
And called it the first comely child of the world,

And said that all that was insulted there
The world insulted, for the Courtly life
Is the world's model. How shall I answer him ?

Can you not give me some true argument ?
I will not tempt him with a lying one.

YOUNGEST PUPIL. O, tell him that the lovers of his music

Have need of him.

SEANCHAN. But I am labouring

For some that shall be born in the nick o' time,

And find sweet nurture, that they may have voices,

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 75

Even in anger, like the strings of harps ;
And how could they be born to majesty
If I had never made the golden cradle ?

YOUNGEST PUPIL [*throwing himself at SEANCHAN's feet*]. Why did you take me from
my father's fields ?

If you would leave me now, what shall I love ?
Where shall I go ? What shall I set my hand
to ?

And why have you put music in my ears,
If you would send me to the clattering houses?
I will throw down the trumpet and the harp,
For how could I sing verses or make music
With none to praise me, and a broken heart ?

SEANCHAN. What was it that the poets
promised you,

If it was not their sorrow ? Do not speak.
Have I not opened school on these bare steps,
And are not you the youngest of my scholars ?
And I would have all know that when all falls
In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,
Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,
The victim's joy among the holy flame,
God's laughter at the shattering of the world.
And now that joy laughs out, and weeps and
burns

On these bare steps.

YOUNGEST PUPIL. O master, do not die !

OLDEST PUPIL. Trouble him with no useless
argument.

Be silent ! There is nothing we can do

76 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Except find out the King and kneel to him,
And beg our ancient right.

For here are some
To say whatever we could say and more,
And fare as badly. Come, boy, that is no use.

[*Raises YOUNGEST PUPIL.*

If it seem well that we beseech the King,
Lay down your harps and trumpets on the
stones

In silence, and come with me silently.
Come with slow footfalls, and bow all your
heads,

For a bowed head becomes a mourner best.

[*They lay harps and trumpets down on
by one, and then go out very solemnly
and slowly, following one another.
Enter MAYOR, TWO CRIPPLES, and
BRIAN, an old servant. The MAYOR,
who has been heard, before he came
upon the stage, muttering 'Chief
Poet,' 'Ireland,' etc., crosses in
front of SEANCHAN to the other side
of the steps. BRIAN takes food out of
basket. The CRIPPLES are watching
the basket. The MAYOR has an
Ogham stick in his hand.*

MAYOR [*as he crosses*]. 'Chief Poet,' 'Ire-
land,' 'Townsmen,' 'Grazing land.'

Those are the words I have to keep in mind—
'Chief Poet,' 'Ireland,' 'Townsmen,'
'Grazing land.'

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 77

I have the words. They are all upon the
Ogham.

'Chief Poet,' 'Ireland,' 'Townsmen,' 'Graz-
ing land.'

But what's their order ?

*[He keeps muttering over his speech
during what follows.]*

FIRST CRIPPLE. The King were rightly
served

If Seanchan drove his good luck away.
What's there about a king, that's in the world
From birth to burial like another man,
That he should change old customs, that
were in it

As long as ever the world has been a world ?

SECOND CRIPPLE. If I were king I would
not meddle with him,

For there is something queer about a poet.
I knew of one that would be making rhyme
Under a thorn at crossing of three roads.
He was as ragged as ourselves, and yet
He was no sooner dead than every thorn tree
From Inchy to Kiltartan withered away.

FIRST CRIPPLE. The King is but a fool !

MAYOR. I am getting ready.

FIRST CRIPPLE. A poet has power from
beyond the world,

That he may set our thoughts upon old times,
And lucky queens and little holy fish
That rise up every seventh year

MAYOR.

Hush ! hush !

78 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

FIRST CRIPPLE. To cure the crippled.

MAYOR. I am half ready now.

BRIAN. There's not a mischief I'd begrudge the King

If it were any other

MAYOR. Hush ! I am ready.

BRIAN. That died to get it. I have brought out the food,

And if my master will not eat of it,

I'll home and get provision for his wake,

For that's no great way off. Well, have your say,

But don't be long about it.

MAYOR [*goes close to SEANCHAN*]. Chief Poet of Ireland,

I am the Mayor of your own town Kinvara,

And I am come to tell you that the news

Of this great trouble with the King of Gort

Has plunged us in deep sorrow—part for you,

Our honoured townsman, part for our good town.

[*Begins to hesitate ; scratching his head.*
But what comes now ? Something about the King.

BRIAN. Get on ! get on ! The food is all set out.

MAYOR. Don't hurry me.

FIRST CRIPPLE. Give us a taste of it.
He'll not begrudge it.

SECOND CRIPPLE. Let them that have their limbs

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 79

Starve if they will. We have to keep in mind
The stomach God has left us.

MAYOR.

Hush ! I have it !

The King was said to be most friendly to us,
And we have reason, as you'll recollect,
For thinking that he was about to give
Those grazing lands inland we so much need,
Being pinched between the water and the
stones.

Our mowers mow with knives between the
stones ;

The sea washes the meadows. You know well
We have asked nothing but what's reasonable.

SEANCHAN. Reason in plenty. Yellowy
white hair,

A hollow face, and not too many teeth.

How comes it he has been so long in the
world

And not found Reason out ?

*[While saying this he has turned half
round. He hardly looks at the*

MAYOR.

BRIAN *[trying to pull MAYOR away]*. What
good is there

In telling him what he has heard all day !

I will set food before him.

MAYOR *[shoving BRIAN away]*. Don't hurry
me !

It's small respect you're showing to the town !

Get farther off ! *[to SEANCHAN]*. We would
not have you think,

o THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Weighty as these considerations are,
That they have been as weighty in our minds
As our desire that one we take much pride in,
A man that's been an honour to our town,
Should live and prosper ; therefore we be-
sech you

To give way in a matter of no moment,
A matter of mere sentiment—a trifle—
That we may always keep our pride in you.

*[He finishes this speech with a pompous
air, motions to BRIAN to bring the
food to SEANCHAN, and sits on seat.]*

BRIAN. Master, Master, eat this ! It's
not king's food,

That's cooked for everybody and nobody.
Here's barley-bread out of your father's oven,
And dulse from Duras. Here is the dulse,
your honour ;

It's wholesome, and has the good taste of the
sea.

*[Takes dulse in one hand and bread in
other and presses them into SEAN-
CHAN's hands. SEANCHAN shows by
his movement his different feeling to
BRIAN.]*

FIRST CRIPPLE. He has taken it, and there'll
be nothing left !

SECOND CRIPPLE. Nothing at all, he wanted
his own sort.

What's honey to a cat, corn to a dog,
Or a green apple to a ghost in a churchyard ?

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 81

SEANCHAN [*pressing food back into BRIAN's hands*]. Eat it yourself, for you have come a journey,
And it may be ate nothing on the way.

BRIAN. How could I eat it, and your honour starving !
It is your father sends it, and he cried
Because the stiffness that is in his bones
Prevented him from coming, and bade me tell you
That he is old, that he has need of you,
And that the people will be pointing at him,
And he not able to lift up his head,
If you should turn the King's favour away ;
And he adds to it, that he cared you well,
And you in your young age, and that it's right
That you should care him now.

SEANCHAN [*who is now interested*]. And is that all ?
What did my mother say !

BRIAN. She gave no message ;
For when they told her you had it in mind to starve,
Or get again the ancient right of the poets,
She said : ' No message can do any good.
He will not send the answer that you want.
We cannot change him.' And she went indoors,
Lay down upon the bed, and turned her face
Out of the light. And thereupon your father

82 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Said : ' Tell him that his mother sends no
message,
Albeit broken down and miserable.'

[*A pause.*
Here's pigeon's eggs from Duras, and these
others
Were laid by your own hens.

SEANCHAN. She has sent no message.
Our mothers know us ; they know us to the
bone.

They knew us before birth, and that is why
They know us even better than the sweet-
hearts

Upon whose breasts we have lain.

Go quickly ! Go
And tell them that my mother is in the
right.

There is no answer. Go and tell them that.
Go tell them that she knew me.

MAYOR. What is he saying ?
I never understood a poet's talk
More than the baa of a sheep !

[*Comes over from seat.* SEANCHAN
turns away.

You have not heard,
It may be, having been so much away,
How many of the cattle died last winter
From lacking grass, and that there was much
sickness

Because the poor have nothing but salt fish
To live on through the winter ?

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 83

BRIAN. Get away,
And leave the place to me ! It's my turn
now,
For your sack's empty !

MAYOR. Is it ' get away ' !
Is that the way I'm to be spoken to !
Am I not Mayor ? Amn't I authority ?
Amn't I in the King's place ? Answer me
that !

BRIAN. Then show the people what a king
is like :
Pull down old merings and root custom up,
Whitewash the dunghills, fatten hogs and
geese,
Hang your gold chain about an ass's neck,
And burn the blessed thorn trees out of the
fields,
And drive what's comely away !

MAYOR. Holy Saint Coleman !

FIRST CRIPPLE. Fine talk ! fine talk !

What else does the King do ?

He fattens hogs and hunts the wise man out.

SECOND CRIPPLE. He fattens geese.

FIRST CRIPPLE. And drives away the swan.

MAYOR. How dare you take his name into
your mouth !

How dare you lift your voice against the
King !

What would we be without him ?

BRIAN. Why do you praise him ?
I will have nobody speak well of him,

84 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Or any other king that robs my master.

MAYOR. And had he not the right to ? and
the right

To strike your master's head off, being the
King,

Or yours or mine ? I say, ' Long live the
King !

Because he does not take our heads from us.'

Call out, ' Long life to him ! '

BRIAN. Call out for him !

[Speaking at same time with MAYOR.]

There's nobody 'll call out for him,

But smiths will turn their anvils,

The millers turn their wheels,

The farmers turn their churns,

The witches turn their thumbs,

Till he be broken and splintered into pieces.

MAYOR *[at same time with BRIAN]*. He
might, if he'd a mind to it,

Be digging out our tongues,

Or dragging out our hair,

Or bleaching us like calves,

Or weaning us like lambs,

But for the kindness and the softness that is
in him. *[They gasp for breath.]*

FIRST CRIPPLE. I'll curse him till I drop !

*[Speaking at same time as SECOND
CRIPPLE and MAYOR and BRIAN,
who have begun again.]*

The curse of the poor be upon him,

The curse of the widows upon him,

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 85

The curse of the children upon him,
The curse of the bishops upon him,
Until he be as rotten as an old mushroom !

SECOND CRIPPLE [*speaking at same time as*

FIRST CRIPPLE *and* MAYOR *and* BRIAN].

The curse of wrinkles be upon him !
Wrinkles where his eyes are,
Wrinkles where his nose is,
Wrinkles where his mouth is,
And a little old devil looking out of every
wrinkle !

BRIAN [*speaking at same time with* MAYOR
and CRIPPLES]. And nobody will sing
for him,

And nobody will hunt for him,
And nobody will fish for him,
And nobody will pray for him,
But ever and always curse him and abuse him.

MAYOR [*speaking at same time with* CRIPPLES
and BRIAN]. What good is in a poet ?

Has he money in a stocking,
Or cider in the cellar,
Or fitches in the chimney,
Or anything anywhere but his own idleness ?

[BRIAN *seizes* MAYOR.

Help ! help ! Am I not in authority ?

BRIAN. That's how I'll shout for the King !

MAYOR. Help ! help ! Am I not in the
King's place ?

BRIAN. I'll teach him to be kind to the
poor !

86 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

MAYOR. Help ! help ! Wait till we are in Kinvara !

FIRST CRIPPLE [*beating MAYOR on the legs with crutch*]. I'll shake the royalty out of his legs !

SECOND CRIPPLE [*burying his nails in MAYOR's face*]. I'll scumble the ermine out of his skin !

[*The CHAMBERLAIN comes down steps shouting, "Silence ! silence ! silence !"*]

CHAMBERLAIN. How dare you make this uproar at the doors.

Deafening the very greatest in the land,
As if the farmyards and the rookeries
Had all been emptied !

FIRST CRIPPLE. It is the Chamberlain.
[*CRIPPLES go out.*]

CHAMBERLAIN. Pick up the litter there,
and get you gone !

Be quick about it ! Have you no respect
For this worn stair, this all but sacred door,
Where suppliants and tributary kings
Have passed, and the world's glory knelt in
silence ?

Have you no reverence for what all other
men

Hold honourable ?

BRIAN. If I might speak my mind,
I'd say the King would have his luck again
If he would let my master have his rights.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 7

CHAMBERLAIN. Pick up your litter ! Take
your noise away !
Make haste, and get the clapper from the
bell !

BRIAN [*putting last of food into basket*].
What do the great and powerful care for
rights
That have no armies !

[CHAMBERLAIN *begins shoving them out
with his staff.*

MAYOR. My lord, I am not to blame.
I'm the King's man, and they attacked me
for it.

BRIAN. We have our prayers, our curses
and our prayers,
And we can give a great name or a bad
one.

[MAYOR *is shoving BRIAN out before him
with one hand. He keeps his face
to CHAMBERLAIN, and keeps bowing.
The CHAMBERLAIN shoves him with
his staff.*

MAYOR. We could not make the poet eat,
my lord.

[CHAMBERLAIN *shoves him with his staff.*
Much honoured [*is shoved again*]—honoured
to speak with you, my lord ;
But I'll go find the girl that he's to marry.
She's coming, but I'll hurry her, my lord.
Between ourselves, my lord [*is shoved again*],
she is a great coaxer.

88 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Much honoured, my lord. Oh, she's the
 girl to do it ;
 For when the intellect is out, my lord,
 Nobody but a woman's any good.

[*Is shoved again.*
 Much honoured, my lord [*is shoved again*],
 much honoured, much honoured !

[*Is shoved out, shoving BRIAN out before him*

[*All through this scene, from the outset of the quarrel, SEANCHAN has kept his face turned away, or hidden in his cloak. While the CHAMBERLAIN has been speaking, the SOLDIER and the MONK have come out of the palace. The MONK stands on top of steps at one side, SOLDIER a little down steps at the other side. COURT LADIES are seen at opening in the palace curtain behind SOLDIER. CHAMBERLAIN is in the centre.*

CHAMBERLAIN [*to SEANCHAN*]. Well, you
 must be contented, for your work

Has roused the commonsort against the King,
 And stolen his authority. The State
 Is like some orderly and reverend house,
 Wherein the master, being dead of a sudden,
 The servants quarrel where they have a mind
 to,

And pilfer here and there.

[*Pause, finding that SEANCHAN does not answer.*

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 89

How many days

Will you keep up this quarrel with the King,
And the King's nobles, and myself, and all,
Who'd gladly be your friends, if you would
let them? [*Going near to MONK.*]

If you would try, you might persuade him,
father.

I cannot make him answer me, and yet
If fitting hands would offer him the food,
He might accept it.

MONK. Certainly I will not.

I've made too many homilies, wherein
The wanton imagination of the poets
Has been condemned, to be his flatterer.
If pride and disobedience are unpunished
Who will obey?

CHAMBERLAIN [*going to other side towards*

SOLDIER]. If you would speak to him,
You might not find persuasion difficult,
With all the devils of hunger helping you.

SOLDIER. I will not interfere, and if he
starve

For being obstinate and stiff in the neck,
'Tis but good riddance.

CHAMBERLAIN. One of us must do it.

It might be, if you'd reason with him, ladies,
He would eat something, for I have a notion
That if he brought misfortune on the King,
Or the King's house, we'd be as little thought
of

As summer linen when the winter's come.

90 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

FIRST GIRL. But it would be the greater
compliment
If Peter 'd do it.

SECOND GIRL. Reason with him, Peter.
Persuade him to eat ; he's such a bag of
bones !

SOLDIER. I'll never trust a woman's word
again !
There's nobody that was so loud against him
When he was at the council ; now the wind's
changed,
And you that could not bear his speech or his
silence,

Would have him there in his old place again ;
I do believe you would, but I won't help you.

SECOND GIRL. Why will you be so hard
upon us, Peter ?
You know we have turned the common sort
against us.

And he looks miserable.

FIRST GIRL. We cannot dance,
Because no harper will pluck a string for us.

SECOND GIRL. I cannot sleep with think-
ing of his face.

FIRST GIRL. And I love dancing more than
anything.

SECOND GIRL. Do not be hard on us ; but
yesterday

A woman in the road threw stones at me.
You would not have me stoned ?

FIRST GIRL. May I not dance ?

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 91

SOLDIER. I will do nothing. You have
put him out,
And now that he is out—well, leave him out.

FIRST GIRL. Do it for my sake, Peter.

SECOND GIRL. And for mine.

*[Each girl as she speaks takes PETER'S
hand with her right hand, stroking
down his arm with her left. While*

SECOND GIRL is stroking his arm,

*FIRST GIRL leaves go and gives him
the dish.*

SOLDIER. Well, well; but not your way.

[To SEANCHAN.] Here's meat for you.

It has been carried from too good a table
For men like you, and I am offering it
Because these women have made a fool of me.

[A pause.]

You mean to starve? You will have none of
it?

I'll leave it there, where you can sniff the
savour.

Snuff it, old hedgehog, and unroll yourself!
But if I were the King, I'd make you do it
With wisps of lighted straw.

SEANCHAN. You have rightly named me.
I lie rolled up under the ragged thorns
That are upon the edge of those great waters
Where all things vanish away, and I have
heard

Murmurs that are the ending of all sound.
I am out of life; I am rolled up, and yet,

92 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Hedgehog although I am, I'll not unroll
For you, King's dog ! Go to the King,
your master.

Crouch down and wag your tail, for it may be
He has nothing now against you, and I think
The stripes of your last beating are all healed.

[The SOLDIER has drawn his sword.]

C A BERLAIN *[striking up sword]*. Put up
your sword, sir ; put it up, I say !
The common sort would tear you into pieces
If you but touched him.

SOLDIE . If he's to be flattered,
Petted, cajoled, and dandled into humour,
We might as well have left him at the table.

[Goes to one side sheathing sword.]

SEANC AN. You must need keep your
patie ce yet awhile,
For I have some few mouthfuls of sweet air
To swallow before I have grown to be as civil
As any other dust.

C A BERLAIN. You wrong us, Seanchan.
There is none here but holds you in respect ;
And if you'd only eat out of this dish,
The King would show how much he honours
you.

[Bowing and smiling.]

Who could imagine you'd so take to heart
Bei g drive from the council ? I am certain
That you, if you will o ly think it over,
Will understand that it is en of law,
Leaders of the King's armies, and the like,

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 93

That should sit there.

SEANCHAN. Somebody has deceived you,
Or maybe it was your own eyes that lied,
In making it appear that I was driven
From the great council. You have driven
away

The images of them that weave a dance
By the four rivers in the mountain garden.

CHAMBERLAIN. You mean we have driven
poetry away.

But that's not altogether true, for I,
As you should know, have written poetry.
And often when the table has been cleared,
And candles lighted, the King calls for me,
And I repeat it him. My poetry
Is not to be compared with yours ; but still,
Where I am honoured, poetry is honoured—
In some measure.

SEANCHAN. If you are a poet,
Cry out that the King's money would not
buy,
Nor the high circle consecrate his head,
If poets had never christened gold, and even
The moon's poor daughter, that most whey-
faced metal,
Precious ; and cry out that none alive
Would ride among the arrows with high heart,
Or scatter with an open hand, had not
Our heady craft commended wasteful virtues.
And when that story's finished, shake your
coat

94 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Where little jewels gleam on it, and say,
A herdsman, sitting where the pigs had
trampled,

Made up a song about enchanted kings,
Who were so finely dressed, one fancied them
All fiery, and women by the churn
And children by the hearth caught up the
song

And murmured it, until the tailors heard it.

CHAMBERLAIN. If you would but eat some-
thing you'd find out.

That you have had these thoughts from lack
of food,

For hunger makes us feverish.

SEANCHAN. Cry aloud,
That when we are driven out we come again
Like a great wind that runs out of the
waste

To blow the tables flat ; and thereupon
Lie down upon the threshold till the King
Restore to us the ancient right of the poets.

MONK. You cannot shake him. I will to
the King,

And offer him consolation in his trouble,
For that man there has set his teeth to die.
And being one that hates obedience,
Discipline, and orderliness of life,
I cannot mourn him.

FIRST GIRL. 'Twas you that stirred it up.
You stirred it up that you might spoil our
dancing.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 95

Why shouldn't we have dancing? We're
not in Lent.

Yet nobody will pipe or play to us ;
And they will never do it if he die.
And that is why you are going.

MONK. What folly's this ?

FIRST GIRL. Well, if you did not do it, speak
to him—

Use your authority ; make him obey you.
What harm is there in dancing ?

MONK. Hush ! begone !

Go to the fields and watch the hurley players,
Or any other place you have a mind to.
This is not woman's work.

FIRST GIRL. Come ! let's away !

We can do nothing here.

MONK. The pride of the poets !

Dancing, hurling, the country full of noise,
And King and Church neglected. Seanchan,
I'll take my leave, for you are perishing
Like all that let the wanton imagination
Carry them where it will, and it's not likely
I'll look upon your living face again.

SEANCHAN. Come nearer, nearer !

MONK. Have you some last wish ?

SEANCHAN. Stoop down, for I would
whisper it in your ear.

Has that wild God of yours, that was so wild
When you'd but lately taken the King's pay,
Grown any tamer ? He gave you all much
trouble.

96 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

MONK. Let go my habit !

SEANCHAN. Have you persuaded him
To chirp between two dishes when the King
Sits down to table ?

MONK. Let go my habit, sir !
[Crosses to centre of stage.

SEANCHAN. And maybe he has learned to
sing quite softly
Because loud singing would disturb the King,
Who is sitting drowsily among his friends
After the table has been cleared. Not yet !

[SEANCHAN has been dragged some feet
clinging to the MONK's habit.

You did not think that hands so full of
hunger
Could hold you tightly. They are not civil
yet.

I'd know if you have taught him to eat bread
From the King's hand, and perch upon his
finger.

I think he perches on the King's strong hand.
But it may be that he is still too wild.

You must not weary in your work ; a king
Is often weary, and he needs a God
To be a comfort to him.

[The MONK plucks his habit away and
goes into palace. SEANCHAN holds
up his hand as if a bird perched upon
it. He pretends to stroke the bird.

A little God,
With comfortable feathers, and bright eyes.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 97

FIRST GIRL. There will be no more dancing
in our time,
For nobody will play the harp or the fiddle.
Let us away, for we cannot amend it,
And watch the hurley.

SECOND GIRL. Hush ! he is looking at us.

SEANCHAN. Yes, yes, go to the hurley, go
to the hurley,
Go to the hurley ! Gather up your skirts—
Run quickly ! You can remember many
love songs ;
I know it by the light that's in your eyes—
But you'll forget them. You're fair to look
upon.
Your feet delight in dancing, and your
mouths
In the slow smiling that awakens love.
The mothers that have borne you mated
rightly.
They'd little ears as thirsty as your ears
For many love songs. Go to the young men.
Are not the ruddy flesh and the thin flanks
And the broad shoulders worthy of desire ?
Go from me ! Here is nothing for your eyes.
But it is I that am singing you away—
Singing you to the young men.

[*The TWO YOUNG PRINCESSES come out
of palace. While he has been speak-
ing the GIRLS have shrunk back hold-
ing each other's hands.*

FIRST GIRL.

Be quiet !

98 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Look who it is has come out of the house.
Princesses, we are for the hurling field.
Will you go there ?

FIRST PRINCESS. We will go with you,
Aileen.

But we must have some words with Seanchan,
For we have come to make him eat and drink.

CHAMBERLAIN. I will hold out the dish and
cup for him

While you are speaking to him of his folly,
If you desire it, Princess.

[He has taken dish and cup.]

FIRST PRINCESS. No, Finula
Will carry him the dish and I the cup.
We'll offer them ourselves.

[They take cup and dish.]

FIRST GIRL. They are so gracious ;
The dear little Princesses are so gracious.

*[PRINCESS holds out her hand for
SEANCHAN to kiss it. He does not
move.]*

Although she is holding out her hand to him,
He will not kiss it.

FIRST PRINCESS. My father bids us say
That, though he cannot have you at his table,
You may ask any other thing you like
And he will give it you. We carry you
With our own hands a dish and cup of
wine.

FIRST GIRL. Oh, look ! he has taken it !
He has taken it !

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 99

The dear Princesses ! I have always said
That nobody could refuse them anything.

[SEANCHAN *takes the cup in one hand.*
In the other he holds for a moment
the hand of the PRINCESS.

SEANCHAN. Oh long, soft fingers and pale
finger-tips,
Well worthy to be laid in a king's hand !
Oh, you have fair white hands, for it is certain
There is uncommon whiteness in these hands.
But there is something comes into my mind,
Princess. A little while before your birth,
I saw your mother sitting by the road
In a high chair ; and when a leper passed,
She pointed him the way into the town.
He lifted up his hand and blessed her hand—
I saw it with my own eyes. Hold out your
hands ;
I will find out if they are contaminated,
For it has come into my thoughts that maybe
The King has sent me food and drink by
hands
That are contaminated. I would see all your
hands.
You've eyes of dancers ; but hold out your
hands,
For it may be there are none sound among
you.

[*The PRINCESSES have shrunk back in terror*
FIRST PRINCESS. He has called us lepers.
[*SOLDIER draws sword.*

100 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

CHAMBERLAIN. He's out of his mind,
And does not know the meaning of what he
said.

SEANCHAN [*standing up*]. There's no sound
hand among you—no sound hand.
Away with you ! away with all of you !
You are all lepers ! There is leprosy
Among the plates and dishes that you have
carried.
And wherefore have you brought me leper's
wine ?

[*He flings the contents of the cup in their faces.*
There, there ! I have given it to you again.
And now

Begone, or I will give my curse to you.
You have the leper's blessing, but you think
Maybe the bread will something lack in
savour

Unless you mix my curse into the dough.

[*They go out hurriedly in all directions.*
SEANCHAN is staggering in the middle
of the stage.

Where did I say the leprosy had come from ?
I said it came out of a leper's hand,

[*Enter CRIPPLES.*
And that he walked the highway. But that's
folly,

For he was walking up there in the sky.
And there he is even now, with his white hand
Thrust out of the blue air, and blessing them
With leprosy.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 101

FIRST CRIPPLE. He's pointing at the moon
That's coming out up yonder, and he calls
it

Leprous, because the daylight whitens it.

SEANCHAN. He's holding up his hand
above them all—

King, noblemen, princesses—blessing all.
Who could imagine he'd have so much
patience?

FIRST CRIPPLE [*clutching the other CRIPPLE*].
Come out of this!

SECOND CRIPPLE [*pointing to food*]. If you
don't need it, sir,
May we not carry some of it away?

[*They cross towards food and pass in
front of SEANCHAN.*

SEANCHAN. Who's speaking? Who are
you?

FIRST CRIPPLE. Come out of this!

SECOND CRIPPLE. Have pity on us, that
must beg our bread
From table to table throughout the entire
world,
And yet be hungry.

SEANCHAN. But why were you born
crooked?

What bad poet did your mothers listen to
That you were born so crooked?

CRIPPLE. Come away!
Maybe he's cursed the food, and it might kill
us.

102 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

OTHER CRIPPLE. Yes, better come away.

[They go out]

SEANCHAN *[staggering, and speaking wearily]*.

He has great strength

And great patience to hold his right hand
there,

Uplifted, and not wavering about.

He is much stronger than I am, much
stronger.

*[Sinks down on steps. MAYOR and
FEDELM have entered.]*

MAYOR. He is delirious now.

FEDELM.

Before I speak

Of food or drink I'll take him out of this.

For while he is on this threshold and can hear,

It may be, the voices that made mock of him,

He would not listen.

MAYOR.

No, speak to him at once.

Press food upon him while delirious

And he may eat not knowing what he does.

[MAYOR goes out.]

FEDELM. Seanchan ! Seanchan !

[He remains looking into the sky.]

Can you not hear me, Seanchan ?

It is myself.

*[He looks at her, dreamily at first, then
takes her hand.]*

SEANCHAN. Is this your hand, Fedelm ?

I have been looking at another hand

That is up yonder.

FEDELM.

I have come for you.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 103

SEANCHAN. Fedelm, I did not know that you were here.

FEDELM. And can you not remember that I promised

That I would come and take you home with me

When I'd the harvest in? And now I've come,

And you must come away, and come on the instant.

SEANCHAN. Yes, I will come. But is the harvest in?

This air has got a summer taste in it.

FEDELM. But is not the wild middle of the summer

A better time to marry? Come with me now!

SEANCHAN [*seizing her by both wrists*]. Who taught you that? For it's a certainty,

Although I never knew it till last night,
That marriage, because it is the height of life,
Can only be accomplished to the full

In the high days of the year. I lay awake :
There had come a frenzy into the light of the stars,

And they were coming nearer, and I knew
All in a minute they were about to marry
Clods out upon the ploughlands, to beget
A mightier race than any that has been.
But some that are within there made a noise,
And frightened them away.

104 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

FEDELM. Come with me now !
We have far to go, and daylight's running
out.

SEANCHAN. The stars had come so near
me that I caught
Their singing. It was praise of that great
race
That would be haughty, mirthful, and white-
bodied,
With a high head, and open hand, and how,
Laughing, it would take the mastery of the
world.

FEDELM. But you will tell me all about
their songs
When we're at home. You have need of
rest and care,
And I can give them you when we're at home.
And therefore let us hurry, and get us home.

SEANCHAN. It's certain that there is some
trouble here,
Although it's gone out of my memory.
And I would get away from it. Give me
your help. [*Trying to rise.*]

But why are not my pupils here to help me ?
Go, call my pupils, for I need their help.

FEDELM. Come with me now, and I will
send for them,
For I have a great room that's full of beds
I can make ready ; and there is a smooth lawn
Where they can play at hurley and sing poems
Under an apple-tree.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 105

SEANCHAN. I know that place :
An apple-tree, and a smooth level lawn
Where the young men can sway their hurley
sticks.

[*Sings.*]

The four rivers that run there,
Through well-mown level ground,
Have come out of a blessed well
That is all bound and wound
By the great roots of an apple,
And all the fowl of the air
Have gathered in the wide branches
And keep singing there.

[FEDELM, *troubled, has covered her eyes
with her hands.*]

FEDELM. No, there are not four rivers, and
those rhymes
Praise Adam's paradise.

SEANCHAN. I can remember now,
It's out of a poem I made long ago
About the Garden in the East of the World,
And how spirits in the images of birds
Crowd in the branches of old Adam's crab-
tree.

They come before me now, and dig in the fruit
With so much gluttony, and are so drunk
With that harsh wholesome savour, that their
feathers

Are clinging one to another with the juice.
But you would lead me to some friendly place,
And I would go there quickly.

106 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

FEDELM [*helping him to rise*]. Come with me.

[*He walks slowly, supported by her, till he comes to table.*]

SEANCHAN. But why am I so weak? Have I been ill?

Sweetheart, why is it that I am so weak?

[*Sinks on to seat.*]

FEDELM [*goes to table*]. I'll dip this piece of bread into the wine,

For that will make you stronger for the journey.

SEANCHAN. Yes, give me bread and wine; that's what I want,

For it is hunger that is gnawing me.

[*He takes bread from FEDELM, hesitates, and then thrusts it back into her hand.*]

But, no; I must not eat it.

FEDELM.

Eat, Seanchan.

For if you do not eat it you will die.

SEANCHAN. Why did you give me food?

Why did you come?

For had I not enough to fight against

Without your coming?

FEDELM.

Eat this little crust,

Seanchan, if you have any love for me.

SEANCHAN. I must not eat it—but that's beyond your wit.

Child! child! I must not eat it, though I die.

FEDELM [*passionately*]. You do not know what love is; for if you loved,

You would put every other thought away.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 107

But you have never loved me.

SEANCHAN [*seizing her by wrist*]. You, a child,

Who have but seen a man out of the window,
Tell me that I know nothing about love,
And that I do not love you? Did I not say
There was a frenzy in the light of the stars
All through the livelong night, and that the
night

Was full of marriages? But that fight's over
And all that's done with, and I have to die.

FEDELM [*throwing her arms about him*]. I
will not be put from you, although I
think

I had not grudged it you if some great lady,
If the King's daughter, had set out your bed.
I will not give you up to death; no, no!
And are not these white arms and this soft
neck

Better than the brown earth?

SEANCHAN [*struggling to disengage himself*].
Begone from me!

There's treachery in those arms and in that
voice.

They're all against me. Why do you linger
there?

How long must I endure the sight of you?

FEDELM. O, Seanchan! Seanchan!

SEANCHAN [*rising*]. Go where you will,
So it be out of sight and out of mind.
I cast you from me like an old torn cap,

108 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

A broken shoe, a glove without a finger,
A crooked penny ; whatever is most worth-
less.

FEDELM [*bursts into tears*]. Oh, do not
drive me from you !

SEANCHAN [*takes her in his arms*]. What
did I say,

My dove of the woods ? I was about to
curse you.

It was a frenzy. I'll unsay it all.

But you must go away.

FEDELM. Let me be near you.
I will obey like any married wife.
Let me but lie before your feet.

SEANCHAN. Come nearer. [*Kisses her*.
If I had eaten when you bid me, sweetheart,
The kiss of multitudes in times to come
Had been the poorer.

[*Enter KING from palace, followed by
the two PRINCESSES.*

KING [*to FEDELM*]. Has he eaten yet ?

FEDELM. No, King, and will not till you
have restored

The right of the poets.

KING [*coming down and standing before
SEANCHAN*]. Seanchan, you have refused

Everybody I have sent, and now
I come to you myself.

FEDELM. Come nearer, King,
He is now so weak he cannot hear your voice.

KING. Seanchan, put away your pride as I

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 109

Have put my pride away. I had your love
Not a great while ago, and now you have
planned

To put a voice by every cottage fire,
And in the night when no one sees who cries,
To cry against me till my throne has
crumbled.

And yet if I give way I must offend
My courtiers and nobles till they, too,
Strike at the crown. What would you have
of me ?

SEANCHAN. When did the poets promise
safety, King ?

KING. Seanchan, I bring you bread in my
own hands,
And bid you eat because of all these reasons,
And for this further reason, that I love you.

[SEANCHAN *pushes bread away, with*
FEDELM's *hand.*

You have refused, Seanchan ?

SEANCHAN. We have refused it.

KING. I have been patient, though I am a
king,
And have the means to force you. But that's
ended,

And I am but a king, and you a subject.
Nobles and courtiers, bring the poets hither ;

[*Enter COURT LADIES, MONK, SOLDIERS,*
CHAMBERLAIN, *and COURTIERS with*
PUPILS, *who have halters round their*
necks.

110 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

For you can have your way. I that was
man,

With a man's heart, am now all king again,
Speak to your master ; beg your life of him ;
Show him the halter that is round your necks.
If his heart's set upon it, he may die ;
But you shall all die with him.

[Goes up steps.

Beg your lives !

Begin, for you have little time to lose.

Begin it, you that are the oldest pupil.

OLDEST PUPIL. Die, Seanchan, and pro-
claim the right of the poets.

KING. Silence ! you are as crazy as your
master.

But that young boy, that seems the youngest
of you

I'd have him speak. Kneel down before him,
boy ;

Hold up your hands to him that you may
pluck

That milky-coloured neck out of the noose.

YOUNGEST PUPIL. Die, Seanchan, and pro-
claim the right of the poets.

SEANCHAN. Come nearer me that I may
know how face

Differs from face and touch you with my
hands.

O more than kin, O more than children could
be,

For children are but born out of our blood

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 111

And share our frailty. O my chicks, my chicks !

That I have nourished underneath my wings
And fed upon my soul.

[He rises and walks down steps.

I need no help.

He needs no help that joy has lifted up
Like some miraculous beast out of Ezekiel.
The man that dies has the chief part in the
story,

And I will mock and mock that image yonder,
That evil picture in the sky—no, no !

I have all my strength again, I will outface it.
O look upon the moon that's standing there
In the blue daylight—take note of the complexion

Because it is the white of leprosy
And the contagion that afflicts mankind
Falls from the moon. When I and these are
dead

We should be carried to some windy hill
To lie there with uncovered face awhile
That mankind and that leper there may know
Dead faces laugh.

[He falls and then half rises.

King ! King ! Dead faces laugh.

[He dies.

OLDEST PUPIL. King, he is dead ; some
strange triumphant thought
So filled his heart with joy that it has burst,
Being grown too mighty for our frailty,

112 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

And we who gaze grow like him and abhor
The moments that come between us and that
death

You promised us.

KING.

Take up his body.

Go where you please and lay it where you
please,

So that I cannot see his face or any

That cried him towards his death.

YOUNGEST PUPIL.

Dead faces laugh !

The ancient right is gone, the new remains

And that is death.

*[They go towards the King holding out
their halters.]*

We are impatient men,

So gather up the halters in your hands.

KING. Drive them away.

*[He goes into the palace. The SOLDIERS
block the way before the PUPILS.]*

SOLDIER.

Here is no place for you.

For he and his pretensions now are finished.

Begone before the men-at-arms are bidden

To beat you from the door.

OLDEST PUPIL.

Take up his body

And cry that driven from the populous
door

He seeks high waters and the mountain birds

To claim a portion of their solitude.

*[They make a litter with cloak and
staffs or use one discovered, heaped
with food, at the opening of the play.]*

THE KING'S THRESHOLD 113

YOUNGEST PUPIL. And cry that when they
took his ancient right

They took all common sleep ; therefore he
claims

The mountain for his mattress and his pillow.

OLDEST PUPIL. And there he can sleep on,
not noticing,

Although the world be changed from worse
to worse,

Amid the changeless clamour of the curlew.

*[They raise the litter on their shoulders
and move a few steps.]*

YOUNGEST PUPIL *[motioning to them to stop]*.

Yet make triumphant music ; sing aloud
For coming times will bless what he has
blessed

And curse what he has cursed.

OLDEST PUPIL.

No, no, be still,

Or pluck a solemn music from the strings

You wrong his greatness speaking so of
triumph.

YOUNGEST PUPIL. O silver trumpets, be
you lifted up

And cry to the great race that is to come.

Long-throated swans upon the waves of time,

Sing loudly for beyond the wall of the world

That race may hear our music and awake.

OLDEST PUPIL *[motioning the musicians to
lower their trumpets]*. Not what it leaves

behind it in the light

But what it carries with it to the dark

114 THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Exalts the soul ; nor song nor trumpet blast
Can call up races from the worsening world
To mend the wrong and mar the solitude
Of the great shade we follow to the tomb.

[FEDELM *and the PUPILS* go out carrying
the litter. Some play a mournful
music.